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## Aunts and Uncles (Menagerie)

Bob De Smith

Dordt College, [bob.desmith@dordt.edu](mailto:bob.desmith@dordt.edu)

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# Aunts and Uncles (Menagerie)

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*Robert De Smith*

Here's to an uncle  
Who sat all day under a tree  
Rather than go to the one-room school,  
His siblings dropping him off  
And picking him up  
Like he was on their bus route.  
He had his lunch pail and the whole day.

He's an emblem of the reluctant learner:  
I see him, his mind vacant—  
Not bored but empty,  
Relieved of learning.

He's my antipode,  
But one afternoon he showed  
Me how to do what I couldn't—  
Muscle a brake spring into place  
By using your shoulder and not your hands.

It's not just that he was stronger than I,  
Though, rough butcher's assistant,  
Familiar with beef carcasses,  
He was—  
But he was more adept,  
Smarter, if you will,  
Than his brainy nephew.

And to another, who was  
At the wheel of the fastest car  
I've been in,  
A 1968 Ford Shelby GT 500.  
That's no metaphor:  
It's the real deal,  
And my brush with automotive legend.

As I grabbed the roll bar  
In the back seat,  
All views restricted by a fastback rear  
And acceleration's lift,  
I heard him proclaim,  
"That's 111 in third gear!"

He could have killed me,  
I suppose, and I loved him for it.

And to  
The aunt who, I'm told,  
Did what a new mother couldn't,  
And stopped my bawling  
By taking me in her lap  
And facing me outward.  
The large circle of family gatherings  
Has been magic to me ever since.

And there's a flyboy,  
The calmest person I know,  
Who flew missions over Europe,  
The jaunty stereotype  
Belied by the steady presence.

Hero? Of course!  
I've seen Dutch survivors  
Weep to thank him for deeds  
Of mercy 50 years past.  
He took it in stride,  
Making him the perfect person  
To visit in his neat  
College business office  
When home was far away.

And how 'bout the uncle,  
The missionary uncle, who  
Abandoned his childhood faith  
For adult baptism and South America.

They called me "Little Abe" after him—  
I'd caught some of his eloquence—  
But he taught me most

When he blustered in from  
The winter outdoors into my  
Grandmother's overstuffed living room  
On a rare visit north.

I was 10, in my best,  
Nervous to greet

The one who had met Auca Indians,  
Who had married the widow of a martyr.

“Well, Bobby, how is it with you and the Lord?”  
He asked as if that were  
(and I guess it was )  
His usual form of “Hello!”

I’m sure I stammered;  
Know I blushed,  
Not very “Little Abe-like,”

But even now, I’m glad  
For the question  
Which has been with me ever since—

As have they all.